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SUBJECT: SRSG SEEKS USG SUPPORT TO MAINTAIN UNMIL TROOP
LEVELS

Classified By: Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield for Reasons 1.4 (b) a
nd (d)

11. (C) Summary: SRSG Ellen Loej is concerned that UNMIL's ability to respond to threats will be impaired if the peacekeeping force is drawn down further than agreed to by the UNSC on September 29, and is seeking continued USG support for maintaining current troop levels for the foreseeable future. According to SRSG Loej, the recent and unfounded rumors of a large quantity of weapons and fighters crossing into Liberia from Cote d'Ivoire has once again brought to the surface Liberians' unease over the fragile nature of the peace in Liberia, and the underlying fear that Liberia will return to war. UNMIL has been proactive in addressing the rumors, and is making extra efforts to calm the population. We agree that there will not be enough time between now and next March, when the SRSG presents her progress report to the UNSC, to assess the impact of the present drawdown. End summary.

12. (C) SRSG Loej told Ambassador November 10 that she has seen an increased level of anxiety recently in the population as well as within the government. Because of recent rumors of insurgents and weapons entering into the eastern part of the country, the population of the Brewerville suburb of Monrovia reacted in panic to explosions of vials brought on by the controlled destruction of drugs, believing that fighting had broken out in the area. Similarly, a recent planned UNMIL crisis management exercise to relocate staff to an alternate command center created such a nervous reaction among the public that the SRSG decided to postpone further exercises for the time being. She has also noticed an unusually high level of interest by GOL officials and others over how the unrest in eastern Congo is playing out, as if they fear the same could happen here.

13. (C) Most importantly, UNMIL efforts to ease the tension by increasing patrols along the border and restoring order has demonstrated how active UNMIL forces continue to be throughout the country. For example, UNMIL forces on November 5 had to assist local police in the eastern town of Zwedru to restore order following a violent protest by about 150 ex-combatants seeking compensation.

14. (C) Following her report to the council next March, the SRSG expects some pressure from UNSC members (especially the French) for a further reduction of UNMIL forces. The ongoing drawdown and reconfiguration of troops as agreed to by the UNSC on September 29, 2008 will not be completed by the time the SRSG's next report is published. It will not be clear at the time of the March UNSC meeting whether the new troop levels are higher than necessary and the SRSG is concerned that any further reductions may impair UNMIL's ability to maintain order. The SRSG has also taken up our efforts to press arriving Liberian PermRep Ambassador Conmany Wesseh to be a more active participant in UN discussions on Liberia, and take up the cause with wavering UNSC members such as France and Costa Rica.

15. (C) The Ambassador and SRSG also discussed the importance

of distinguishing between "activation" and "operational" in discussions about the readiness of the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL), as the two terms are not well understood even within the UN system. The first AFL battalion has been activated and the second is to be activated in December, but neither battalion will be operational -- and able to replace UNMIL peacekeepers -- for a minimum of two years. The SRSG asked for support from the USG both in Washington and New York to ensure there is no misconception that we are farther along on the benchmark of AFL capacity than we really are. The Ambassador agreed that we need to use AFRICOM's Deputy Commander's upcoming visit for the December activation and other opportunities to stress realistic timelines for bringing the capabilities of the AFL to a level that will allow it to begin taking over some of Liberia's security responsibility from UNMIL. But we must remember that the AFL numbers only 2,000 soldiers.

16. (C) Comment: The USG will be required to develop a response for the UNSC meeting in March, and we will add this point in our message to the transition team. SRSG Loej appears to be seeking assurances that the USG position on UNMIL troop strength will not change with the new administration. Without making any specific commitments, we have publicly and privately stated that America's commitment to Liberia will remain strong. However, we agree with the SRSG's view that March will be far too early to assess the impact of the present drawdown and reconfiguration. As well, UNMIL needs time to complete its reconfiguration; i.e., reducing the number of military zones to compensate for the reduction of one battalion, before planning for any further withdrawals.

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THOMAS-GREENFIELD